

Harvard Allston Task Force
Meeting Minutes
Monday, July 26, 2006
Honan-Allston Library
6:30 p.m.

I. Attendance:

Harvard Allston Task Force

Paul Berkeley
Mary Helen Black
John Bruno
John Cusack
Rita DiGesse
Brian Gibbons
Bruce Houghton
Harry Mattison
Ray Mellone

Boston Redevelopment Authority

Gerald Autler
Linda Kowalcky

Harvard University

Will Donham
Mirtha Garcia
Jeremy Gibson
Kevin McCluskey
Andy O'Brien
Alison Reinhardt
Mary Power
Steve Smith
Kathy Spiegelman
Maile Takahashi

The meeting began at 6:35 p.m.

Kevin McCluskey, Harvard University, introduced Jeremy Gibson, Associate Director of Athletics at Harvard University, to discuss Harvard's reconstruction plans for Harvard Stadium.

Jeremy clarified several points about the Stadium reconstruction:

- Harvard has applied for a permit to turf the athletic field within the stadium and will apply for a building permit for the bubble soon.
- Harvard's athletic department will go to the entertainment license commission on August 16th. This is something the athletics department is required to do every year to get approval to hold its football games in the stadium.
- There are three components for Harvard's reconstruction plans for the stadium, all of which are being undertaken to extend the usefulness of the field.
 - Replace the grass in the stadium with synthetic turf.
 - Install a seasonal bubble within the stadium that will extend over the field within the walls of the stadium. The bubble will most likely go up after Thanksgiving and down in March.

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The bubble is being installed to provide increased practice space, and athletics space for varsity programs, intramurals and recreational uses.

- Install lights. The lights will not be towers and will not extend over the height of the existing stadium. Engineers have determined that the lights will not create light spillage above and outside the stadium. The purpose of the lights is to increase the availability of the field during the fall.
- Harvard has reviewed the plans with the Boston Landmarks Commission and with the Massachusetts Historical Commission.
- The Mass Historical Commission made recommendations for how the light fixtures should be attached and Harvard accommodated the request. It also requested that the bubble match the color of the stadium and Harvard complied.
- The bubble will be an air-locked structure and people will enter and exit through an air-locked door, most likely on a rotary system. The entrance will be at the Murr Center end of the stadium.

Ray Mellone: Since the improvements will increase the usage of the field, will there be any community uses for the Stadium?

Jeremy Gibson: Extending more usage to the community is something Harvard should look into. The athletic department will work with Kevin McCluskey to pursue this idea further.

Paul Berkeley: Will the bubble magnify or diminish sound? Will the bubble extend into the existing football seats?

Jeremy Gibson: The bubble will not extend into the existing football seats. We have not had sound testing, but since it's completely enclosed sound will likely be contained within the bubble.

Audience: Since there will be lights, will there be more events/activities at night in addition to the football games?

Jeremy Gibson: The lights will allow practices to extend into the evenings; however, if Harvard wants to hold night time events, we have to go to the entertainment license commission to get approval. We will also let the neighborhood know if we ever intend to do something like that.

Ray: Is Harvard concerned about any security problems at night?

Jeremy Gibson: Harvard doesn't anticipate that there will be an increase in security problems but we will be closely monitoring the situation and working with Harvard Police.

Audience: Is the artificial turf pervious?

Jeremy Gibson: There are several layers to the turf but water will filter into the ground just as if it were grass.

Audience: What is the mound of dirt outside the stadium?

Jeremy Gibson: Some of the dirt came from within the stadium in order to start installing the turf. The dirt is being reused for Harvard's athletic fields that are in poor condition.

Paul Berkeley: Is the bubble temperature controlled? If so, is it conceivable that other kinds of events could take place within the bubble?

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Jeremy Gibson: The bubble will allow practices to be held in the colder months, however, if Harvard wants to hold other events in the stadium, we have to go to the entertainment license commission to get approval.

Paul Berkeley: Harvard should think about the impact the athletic events and other events in the stadium will have on the traffic and the neighborhood. On game days traffic cops always give the right-of-way to cars exiting the stadium so it can be frustrating to anyone else driving on North Harvard St. If Harvard is having an event at the stadium that will impact the neighborhood, it should work with the neighborhood to provide mitigation.

David McGregor, of Cooper Robertson and Partners, Harvard's consultant for the Master Plan, gave a presentation on the Master Plan's transportation components. The proposed Phase 1 roadway improvements include:

- Reconstructing North Harvard Street
- Improving Intersections
- Constructing Stadium Way/Windom Bypass
- Constructing the I-90 connector
- Improving Weeks Bridge

The proposed location for the Windom Street Bypass is entirely on Harvard property. The location doesn't go fully to the right of the Sears building and instead cuts through the middle of the Sears site. Harvard's planning options also take into consideration the possibility of gaining access to the CSX land in the future. The extent to which the city street grid will be completed will depend on community feedback.

Questions/Comments:

Bruce Houghton: Part of the current problem is that the trucks/cars exiting the rail yards have to immediately cross four lanes of traffic. This problem could be alleviated if the truck exit was moved backwards by about 60-100 feet so that the trucks would only have to cross two lanes of traffic and the traffic backup would lessen. You can't eliminate the median because the trucks still have to cross three lanes of traffic on Soldier's Field Road.

Kathy Spiegelman: Even though Harvard owns the CSX railroad land, it doesn't have the right to access it or demand that CSX change the location of the exit. Harvard could have conversations with CSX about moving the exit.

Bruce Houghton said that he would also be willing to engage in conversations with CSX because of his position as a business owner right next to the rail yard.

Harry Mattison: Cars will just go down the side streets of the neighborhood instead of the Windom Street Bypass, Western Ave. and North Harvard Street.

Brian Gibbons: How many lanes will be on the streets? Will the streets be safer?

David McGregor: The streets need to be useful enough that people don't want to go on other side streets but at the same time curves can help slow down the pace of traffic.

Harry Mattison: Would it re-grade on Cambridge Street?

David McGregor: Yes, there would be a re-grade.

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Audience: Will you leave Windom Street as a through way? Will Hopedale go through to the Windom Street Bypass?

David McGregor: Both of those issues are up for discussion from the neighborhood.

Ray Mellone: Can you explain the advantage of your proposed transportation system to what currently exists? It looks like under the proposed plan Rena Street would become very busy. People want to avoid traffic lights so they will cut through the community to get to somewhere quicker. Do you have an estimate for the number of vehicles using these streets on a daily basis now as compared to how many vehicles are projected after the buildings go up? It looks like the proposed solutions are just transferring cars onto the quiet streets and into the neighborhood.

David McGregor: Rena Street will be kept a one-way street. Our engineers have studied the traffic proposal and have found it to be the easiest way for vehicles to get to and from I-90 and the route doesn't go through the community at all. Our goal is to develop a system that will keep Harvard generated traffic out of the community. We will keep working on the proposed system if we haven't met that goal.

Paul Berkeley: It seems like Harvard traffic is the only traffic being considered. Other vehicles will try to avoid the lights at Cambridge and North Harvard streets and go through the neighborhood.

David McGregor: Harvard will provide you with a map of the neighborhood and you can draw on it to show where you think the vehicle traffic will go into the neighborhood as a result of the proposed plan.

Improvements for North Harvard Street and Western Avenue include signaling intersections where there aren't traffic signals now and creating bump-outs, an extension of the sidewalk, to replace parking along the street. There is only so much that can be done about the traffic on Western Ave. because it is a major artery.

Bruce Houghton: What will the impacts be on the neighborhood when Harvard has a big function? Harvard is proposing beautiful streets but how will the loss of parking be accommodated? 45 percent of Allston residents take public transportation. Are the planners considering ways to accommodate public transportation instead of having buses stop in the middle of the road? The streets should be balanced to accommodate more efficient public transportation.

David McGregor: If parking is taken off the streets, bus pull-offs can be accommodated.

Mary Helen Black: Part of the solution is to improve traffic enforcement. For example, at the intersection of North Harvard Street and Franklin Street cars are always double parked and delivery trucks take over the lane in front of 7-11.

David McGregor: Our first goal is to do whatever improvements we can physically and then deal with the management and enforcement of the streets.

John Bruno: If you slow traffic down too much on the main arteries then you will bring traffic into the neighborhood. If you look down Western Avenue there are more bus stops than houses. Where the road can be widened is where pull-offs for buses should be created. The plan should be kept simple to keep the traffic flowing. Harvard has an opportunity to use the land that it owns to create places for bus pull-offs by cutting into Harvard land. I don't think the road should be uniformly widened. The places where the road is widened should be strategically placed. From the west side of North Harvard Street you can't narrow the road anymore.

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David McGregor: The traffic proposal was studied and completed by our sub-consultants VHB. The task force members should fill out a map of the neighborhood reflecting how they think traffic will flow into the neighborhood as a result of the proposal.

Ray Mellone: Will the traffic create a lot of noise?

David McGregor: There will be trees lining the streets. Additionally, if it is Harvard land then there may also be Harvard buildings on the land to buffer the sounds of traffic from the neighborhood.

Harry Mattison: Has a long-term traffic analysis been completed?

Kathy Spiegelman: This is in the process of being completed. The further out in time you try to project the more hypothetical your analysis will become. The BRA is asking for Harvard to provide an analysis for 10, 20, and 30 years.

John Bruno: Will there be curb cuts on Western Avenue?

David McGregor: We can't initiate curb cuts if they aren't already there. To access the Science building there won't need to be any curb cuts because the access will be on the Windom Street bypass. A lot of the curb cuts that are on Western Avenue today will go away.

Bruce Houghton: Will Harvard consider providing access to its shuttle buses?

Kathy Spiegelman: We are talking about that and still formulating a plan. There are implications and issues that would need to be worked out with other Boston entities that provide transportation services.

Ray Mellone: If Charlesview does decide to change locations will Stadium Way be a straight road?

David McGregor: Yes, it will be straight but we also have to plan for if the negotiations with Charlesview don't go through.

Audience member: Your presentation mentioned something about graduate student housing?

David McGregor: Graduate student housing will be in scale with the neighborhood and it will be low-rise, residential housing. Graduate student housing would be located on Harvard property south of Rena Street. The science complex would be located north of Rena Street and south of Western Avenue.

Kathy Spiegelman: To clarify, graduate student housing wasn't included in the Institutional Master Plan (IMP) amendment but will be included in the Phase 1 IMP.

Paul Berkeley: Can you talk about the transit system for the Weeks Bridge. The Weeks Bridge is the only bridge across the Charles River that is reserved for pedestrians and bicyclists only.

David McGregor: There are three options for handling transit on the Weeks Bridge. The bridge is 20 feet wide so the first option is to have a one-way shuttle, which would take up 12 feet and reserve 8 feet for pedestrians/bicyclists. You would also have to ensure that the bridge is structurally sound. The second option would be to widen the Weeks Bridge and the third option would be a new bridge. All options would strive to maintain the character of the bridge.

Ray Mellone: What problems would be solved by putting transit on the Weeks Bridge?

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David McGregor: In order to make the transit system work and for traffic to flow smoothly there will need to be more shuttle service from Allston to Harvard Square. This won't work alone on the Larz Anderson Bridge so there needs to be a new way.

Gerald passed out 2000 Census data for the Allston neighborhood that included estimates for the 2005 data. Gerald asked the Task Force members to review the data and he said that the BRA will continue to update some of the data that the Task Force members had asked for at previous meetings.

Kathy Spiegelman asked the Task Force members to share their thoughts and ideas for what they would like Harvard to do with some of their vacant properties in Allston and if there were specific properties that the Task Force wanted Harvard to address.

Harry Mattison: The biggest issue is that there currently are no uses in a lot of Harvard's buildings in Allston. Harvard should begin to initiate uses for the Brighton Mills Shopping Center and south of the shopping center.

Gerald passed out a map detailing Harvard's ownership in Allston.

John Bruno: It would be helpful if Harvard could give us an idea of which properties it is more likely to fill sooner rather than later before the Task Force comes up with a wish list.

Kathy Spiegelman: Harvard is interested in finding out what kinds of uses the Task Force and community are interested in having developed on Western Ave.

Bruce Houghton: Harvard's practice of offering one-year leases is demoralizing to the neighborhood. No company will want to start its business with a one year lease. If Harvard doesn't have uses for certain buildings for the next 10 years then it should offer at least 5 year leases to start to spark some jobs and activities in the neighborhood.

Kathy Spiegelman: Harvard does acknowledge this problem. Part of the reason was because Harvard has been in the process of developing its Master Plan. Now that Harvard is getting closer to filing its Master Plan it has a better idea of what properties will not be included and can be used to develop interim uses that the neighborhood wants to see.

John Bruno: One industry that was good for Allston's economy was the media/film industry on Western Ave. This industry does business with community vendors, brings money in and spends money, and uses things like catering from local vendors.

Ray Mellone: I think Harvard needs to solve the Charlesview negotiations. Harvard should offer Charlesview empty tenant locations on Soldier's Field Road toward the river. This is what a lot of residents have asked for and it will improve their quality of life. The Brighton Mills shopping center doesn't meet that demand.

Kathy Spiegelman: We're pretty far down the road into the negotiations with Charlesview and Harvard is committed to making it work. There may be opportunities for other housing across Western Avenue.

Mary Helen Black: Part of the short term solution is to maintain the look of the property. For example, Harvard could take down old signs, repaint buildings, plant flowers. When Harvard did this with the old Verizon building it made a tremendous difference.

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Harry Mattison suggested forming a sub-committee or having a working meeting to discuss ideas for interim uses before the next Task Force meeting.

Bruce Houghton: It's hard to think about community uses without seeing the structures of the building. Can Harvard provide physical pictures of the buildings?

Audience member: I would like the Task Force members to consider requesting that Harvard not buy any more properties on Western Avenue until they figure out a development plan for their vacant properties. Also I would like the Task Force members to ask Harvard to commit to taking parking off of North Harvard Street and Western Ave.

John Bruno: While that is a great idea to ask Harvard to stop buying property, I don't think that's fair to Harvard or the property owners.

Ray Mellone: I'd like to make a motion to ask Harvard to consider a moratorium on buying property in Allston.

Kathy Spiegelman: Once Harvard submits its IMP and makes a proposal for new streetscapes we're hoping to remove parking from North Harvard Street and Western Ave.

Harry Mattison: How soon will that be?

Kathy Spiegelman: It would be part of the Phase 1 Master Plan.

Paul Berkeley: From my understanding Adam Schulman from the Boston Transportation Department has done an analysis and has recommendations for improvements on Western Ave. and North Harvard Street.

Harry Mattison: Can we establish a working group to discuss interim uses and a transportation working group?

Ray Mellone: Harry can be the chair of the interim uses working group.

Bruce Houghton: We could also have members from the community who have knowledge on the subject area sit on the working groups.

The Task Force members and Gerald discussed the proposed agenda items for the next few meetings. The schedule was tentatively set as follows:

- August 14th: Half the meeting would be reserved to meet Daly Genick, the architects for the Allston Brighton Arts Center. The other half of the meeting would be for a discussion on Community Benefits.
- August 30th: Harvard's Interim Use Plan (meeting cancelled, topic moved to September)
- September 11th: Behnisch and Cooper Robertson and Partners to talk about the Harvard's Master Plan open space framework.

Kevin McCluskey: I want to address the idea of Harvard imposing a moratorium on the purchase of land. Harvard understands the community's frustration. As Harvard engages with the community in this joint planning process we want to work together toward the best possible outcome. I would hate to have a moratorium in effect and the community and Harvard to come to agreement on a piece of the puzzle but not be able to implement it because Harvard doesn't have any site control.

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Harry Mattison: I think the Task Force and the community is less concerned about who owns the buildings and is more concerned about the uses for the buildings.

Ray Mellone made a motion to approve the meeting minutes from the June 12th, June 28th and July 10th Task Force meetings. The Task Force members agreed and the minutes were approved.

The meeting ended at 8:45 p.m.